DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 289 SO 013 922

AUTHOR Kasson, Cheryl G.
TITLE Expression of Emotions through Art: A Phenomenological Approach.
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (Boston, MA, November 4-7, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Expression; Definitions; *Research Methodology; Self Expression
IDENTIFIERS *Phenomenology

ABSTRACT

This paper examines phenomenological approaches to studying expressions of emotions through art. The author begins her discussion by defining the terms in the title. Expressions are controlled, deliberate gestures. Emotions are sensations which involve appraisals of something. Art is something consciously controlled by the artist. The creation of a work of art involves choice and deliberation. A phenomenological approach looks at the "lived experience" (an experience that is conscious and pre-reflective) of expressing emotions through one or more of the arts. The paper then looks at three types of bracketing which David Denton distilled from the phenomenological literature of the past 70 years and shows how each of these categories may be applied to the experience of expressing emotions through the arts. The types of bracketing are: (1) "cognitive" or the conscious, reflective act of setting aside accustomed perceptual sets and interpretive frameworks for the purpose of gaining a clear, new view of the phenomenon; (2) "existential" bracketing in which the fresh perception is occasioned by some interruption in the normal flow of events such as sudden death; and (3) "dramaturgical" bracketing in which forms of art are used to set aside every-dayness, to open new possibilities for perception, judgment, and interpretation. The paper then discusses a phenomenological approach which uses motion pictures to study the vocal and facial expressions of emotion. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the ethical and methodological considerations for taking a phenomenological approach. (RM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED219289

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Cheryl G. Kasson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS THROUGH ART: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Cheryl G. Kasson
University of Colorado, Boulder

Paper Presented to the
American Educational Studies Association
At the Annual Convention
Boston, Massachusetts
November 4-7, 1981

SP013922

EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS THROUGH ART: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Cheryl G. Kasson
University of Colorado, Boulder

Perhaps the simplest way to begin this discussion is by defining the terms in my title. "Expression," as I use it, is distinguished from "manifestation" of emotion, to use Francis Schrag's terminology.[1] Manifestations of emotions are nonvoluntary or nondeliberate symptoms of emotion, such as trembling in fear or blushing with embarrassment. Expressions are controlled, deliberate gestures, such as shaking one's fist to show that one is angry. This distinction is commonly made in discussions of emotional expression in art,[2] and it is this purposive use of media to communicate or describe feelings which is generally called "expression" of emotions.

By "emotions" I mean sensations which involve appraisals of something. I take the idea that emotion involves an evaluation or appraisal from two papers entitled "The Education of the Emotions."[3] These two papers also reflect the related idea, shared by John Dewey and Jean-Paul Sartre,[4] that an emotion is always directed toward some object. Even a so-called "objectless" emotion, such as vague anxiety, has something beyond itself to which it points.

Nevertheless, I believe that emotions may be abstracted from their everyday contexts--and thus from their objects--for artistic treatment. In such cases, I assume that the form of the feeling and not the feeling itself is presented in the work, as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone suggests in her discussion of the experience of dance.[5] For example, shrugging one's shoulders is a common expres-

sion of resignation. If, however, a dancer shrugs her shoulders in a dance, we see only the form of the emotion. We do not imagine that the dancer is actually feeling resignation at the time.

When I refer to "art" in general as a process or activity, I mean something consciously controlled by the artist. I assume that the creation of a work of art--be it a dance, a poem, or a painting; whether done by a professional artist or an elementary school student--involves choice and deliberation. This is in line with my conception of expression as a deliberate act.

This is not to say that the creation of art is solely an intellectual activity or that it involves premeditated choice at every moment. Often the outcome results from a mixture of calculation, spontaneity, and happy accident. An inkblot may not be a work of art, but it could be the start of one. As Dewey remarks, all art is marked by a transformation--a spontaneous and unintended activity "is transformed because it is undertaken as a mean to a consciously entertained consequence."[6]

I also want to stress here that I do not believe that all works of art must express emotions nor that emotions are all that artists express. Their work may also express ideas about life, concepts about art, or merely particular senses of movement or order. Some works, such as Merce Cunningham's dances, are purposely devoid of emotion. Others, like many of Judy Chicago's sculptures and paintings, are explicitly emotional. Art has many facets, and this paper focuses on only one of them.

Finally, we come to the term "phenomenological approach," which brings us to the heart of the paper. What do I mean by this term?

How does one approach the present topic phenomenologically?

First, as in any phenomenological study, we begin by looking at the phenomenon, by returning to the "things themselves," as Husserl said. In our current study, the phenomenon is the "lived experience" of expressing emotions through one or more of the arts. By "lived experience" I mean experience that is conscious and pre-reflective. We may have experiences of which we are not aware, such as walking in our sleep, and we may filter experience through various categories of reflection--the theories and ways of classifying reality we have developed in our lives.

Phenomenologists, however, do not focus on this. Instead, they begin their analyses with descriptions of conscious experience as it is lived. This can only be done when researchers respect their subjects' perceptions of their experiences, when researchers attend to their subjects' expressions of their lived experience.

In studying the experience of emotions or the arts, verbal expression is not the only means of communication we can make available to our subjects. Some people are better able to express themselves through movement or visual imagery than through words. In using a phenomenological approach, we assume that we--the researchers--are able to understand all these expressions because we share a common humanity with our subjects. This is opposed to the behavioristic approach, which views subjects as automatons, which excludes "mentalistic" notions from consideration, which effectively separates subjects from researchers and researchers from their everyday human identities.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty,[7] classical psychologists

suppose that the psyche is something private and hidden from the view of others. Thus, one can only infer another's psyche from his bodily appearances. However, for the phenomenologist, consciousness is turned primarily toward the world; it is discovered in our conduct, our way of dealing with the world. Therefore, we understand others' conscious experience directly, through their conduct, rather than indirectly, inferring internal states from separate external manifestations.

Furthermore, I share with the other the experience of corporeality, of living as a feeling being-in-the-world. Because of this "universality of feeling,"[8] the other is never purely an object or automaton for me. I understand his movements as "gestures," as expressions of his experience, because that experience is in many ways like my own. As Merleau-Ponty says, "The experience of the other is always that of a replica of myself, of a response to myself."[9]

This assumption of a common humanity between researchers and those they study generally underlies the work of phenomenologists. From the very beginning, therefore, the phenomenological investigator proceeds from a different grounding from that of the traditional psychologist. In addition, as Sartre points out, they differ in their procedures. The traditional researcher begins by accumulating <u>facts</u>; the phenomenologist seeks first the <u>essence</u> of the phenomenon, since "essences alone permit us to classify and inspect the facts."[10]

To traditional psychologists, Sartre suggests, all acts are mere <u>accidents</u>--isolated events. These psychologists consider the psychic state, including emotions, as facts, thus as accidental,

isolated, signifying nothing. To phenomenologists, on the other hand, emotions, like every human fact, are essentially significative.[11] In phenomenological studies, we can look for the essence of emotions in their meaning in our lives. In the theory which Sartre outlines, emotions are our way of magically transforming the world when we cannot actually change it. For example, when we faint in fear before a threat from which we cannot escape, we are magically escaping; "the fainting is a refuge."[12]

To Sartre, the essence of emotion is this "return of consciousness to the magical attitude."[13] This essence unifies emotional experiences; one experience of emotion is not isolated from another as fact is from fact. The essence also reveals that the experience is not accidental, but meaningful; "it signifies something for my psychic life."[14] This emphasis on signification in human consciousness, on the meaning rather than the cause of a phenomenon, is another common characteristic of phenomenological studies.

Phenomenologists seek the essence of a phenomenon through a method called the "reduction" or "bracketing." With this act, we suspend our accustomed ways of looking at things--our commonsense notions or the concepts of our disciplines--in order to let the phenomenon itself (the lived experience) appear.

Phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty acknowledge "the impossibility of a complete reduction," since our reflections are always "carried out in the temporal flux on to which we are trying to seize."[15] Nevertheless, the reduction or bracketing is a useful procedure, though imperfect, like any research tool.

In order to be more specific, let us now look at three types of bracketing which David Denton has distilled from the phenomeno-

logical literature of the past 70-plus years.[16] I would like to show how each of these categories may be applied to the experience of expressing emotions through the arts.

The first type of bracketing is "cognitive"--the conscious, reflective "act of setting aside accustomed perceptual sets and interpretive frameworks" for the purpose of gaining a clear, new view of the phenomenon.[17] In our present study, we may begin such an act by temporarily shelving our theories and other preconceived notions of what goes on in artistic expression, by looking at what the participants in arts experiences actually do, and by asking those participants to describe their experience in their own words. They may also be asked to do their own bracketing, to uncover and set aside their own assumptions about their lived experience.

The second category is "existential bracketing," in which "the fresh perception is occasioned by some interruption in the normal flow of events."[18] This interruption may be a tragic event, such as a sudden death, or a joyous one, such as the arrival of someone long awaited. In either case, the daily routine of life has been "put in parentheses," and new perspectives have become possible. This type of bracketing is often recounted in the literature of the arts therapies, particularly when the therapist has clients imaginatively relive an emotional experience. For example, in an article on dance therapy, Walt Anderson describes an experience in which he silently acted out a memory--of making his way down a steep, dangerous slope--while three people copied his motions.[19] Such an enactment of a terrifying experience may be enough to return

the leader or his followers to the "existential bracketing" which occurred in the inital experience.

"Dramaturgical bracketing" is the third category listed by Denton. In this case, "forms of art are used to set aside everydayness, to open new possibilities for perception, judgment, and interpretation."[20] Denton mentions the Greek theatre, sociodrama, and psychodrama in this context, but any art medium may be used to effect this experience. This category relates to the concept of art as a way of perceiving and the artist as someone who actually perceives things in an extraordinary or expanded way. It implies that one need not currently feel the emotion in order for its artistic expression to open up one's perceptions.

Not all phenomenological studies use every type of bracketing, but they all stay at the level of human experience as it is lived, rather than breaking experience into bits that we need special tools to perceive and analyze. Sheets-Johnstone, in her inquiry into the experience of dance, notes that she has purposely avoided anatomical and kinesiological terms to describe movement, since these terms "would not coincide with the phenomenological nature of this descriptive study: they would not describe movement as it appears."[21]

Two examples of studies which do approach emotional expression from a level below lived experience are the lines of research pursued by Ray L. Birdwhistell and other kinesic analysts and the work of Paul Ekman and his associates. The kinesicist, studying emotional communication through body movement, uses motion pictures to record natural movement, but then analyzes the action frame by frame and breaks it into "kinesic units."[22] Similarly, Ekman and

his colleagues, studying facial expressions of emotion, videotaped their subjects and used these tapes to measure various anatomical units with a special coding system.[23]

Compare these approaches with that of Eugene Levitt, who also used motion pictures in a study of vocal and facial expressions of emotion.[24] Levitt, however, had judges from the same population as his subjects view the films and identify the emotions expressed by the subjects. Thus, he remained on the level of the lived experience of expression.

The atomistic methods of Birdwhistell and Ekman are useful for some purposes, but they do not help us describe or understand the human experience of movement, which is holistic and dynamic. We do not perceive movement frame by frame nor in anatomical units, but, as Sheets-Johnstone states, in a total configuration or Gestalt.[25]

This is one aspect of expressing emotions through art. I do not know the essence of this experience, but I could move toward it by studying the experience phenomenologically. This I am beginning to do, concentrating on dance and working in educational settings--such as regular classrooms, special classes, and workshops for teachers and other adults.

In any of these situations, there are, I believe, ethical as well as methodological considerations for taking a phenomenological approach. For one thing, as a phenomenological researcher, I do not need to deceive or manipulate the participants in my study. I can be completely straightforward with them about the purposes of my research. In fact, the participants may actually be considered my co-researchers, since they work with me in trying to discover

and describe the essential features of their experiences. During this process, I allow them the dignity of reporting their experiences from their own perspectives. Finally, I never stray far from the perceptions of my participants, never analyze or reduce their lived experience out of existence.

Besides these general attributes of phenomenological research, there is a value for the participants in this particular study--in expressing emotions through art. The act of expression may enable them to learn something about themselves and their feelings; they may engage in what Elliot Eisner calls "the act of discovery through expression."[26] He suggests that new concepts are formed in the process of representation. This thought echoes Merleau-Ponty's observation that both philosophy and art are "not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but . . . the act of bringing truth into being."[27] We may also apply here one of the fundamental assumptions of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology--that "there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself."[28] Proceeding from this supposition, we may conclude that the participants in my study may come to know themselves better in the world of expression that they create.

Notes

1. Francis Schrag, "Learning and the Expression of Emotion," Studies in Philosophy and Education 8 (Summer 1973): 31.

2. See, for example, C. J. Ducasse, "Art and the Language of the Emotions," in Lee A. Jacobus, Aesthetics and the Arts (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 49-50; and John Dewey, Art as Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), pp. 60-61.

3. Daniel R. DeNicola, in Philosophy of Education-1979: Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1980), pp. 211-212; and Richard S. Peters, in Magda B. Arnold, ed., Feelings and Emotions: The Loyola Symposium (New York and London: Academic Press, 1970), p. 188.

4. Dewey, Art as Experience, p. 42; Jean-Paul Sartre, The Emotions: Outline of a Theory, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), p. 51.

5. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, The Phenomenology of Dance (New York: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 69-71.

6. Dewey, Art as Experience, p. 62.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," in The Primacy of Perception, ed. by James M. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 113-120.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Dialogue and the Perception of the Other," in The Prose of the World, ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by John O'Neill (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973). p. 137.

9. Ibid., p. 135.

10. Sartre, The Emotions, p. 10.

11. Ibid., pp. 15-16.

12. Ibid., p. 62.

13. Ibid., p. 90.

14. Ibid., p. 91.

15. M. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenolcgy of Perception, trans. by Colin Smith, revisions by Forrest Williams (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978), p. xiv.

16. David E. Denton, "Concepts and Strategies of Phenomenological Research" (Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1979), pp. 7-8.

17. Ibid., p. 7.

18. Ibid.

19. Walt Anderson, "Pas de Psyche," Human Behavior (March 1975): 58.

20. Denton, "Concepts and Strategies of Phenomenological Research," p. 8.

21. Sheets-Johnstone, The Phenomenology of Dance, p. 56.

22. See, for Example, Ray R. Birdwhistell, "The Kinesic Level in the Investigation of the Emotions," in Peter H. Knapp, ed., Expression of the Emotions in Man (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), pp. 123-139. See also the article following Birdwhistell' on kinesic research and therapy.

23. Paul Ekman, Wallace V. Friesen, and Sonia Ancoli, "Facial Signs of Emotional Experience," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 39 (1980): 1125-1133.

24. Eugene A. Levitt, "The Relationship between Abilities to Express Emotional Meanings Vocally and Facially," in Joel R. Davitz, The Communication of Emotional Meaning (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1964), pp. 87-100.

25. Sheets-Johnstone, The Phenomenology of Dance, p. 76.

26. Elliot W. Eisner, "The Role of the Arts in Cognition and Curriculum," Phi Delta Kappan 63 (September 1981): 50.

27. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. xx.

28. Ibid., p. xi.